The Romantics and Victorians

When we hear the word *romantic*, we often think of love and relationships, but the word 'Romanticism' means something both broader and more specific. This term refers to developments in the arts, literature, music, and philosophy, from the late 18th until the early 19th centuries. The term 'romanticism' wasn't used until the middle of the 19th century.

During the Romantic period, British society was undergoing massive changes. Artists and scholars began to challenge the establishment--in England in particular, poets drove this movement. They sought greater freedoms and better treatment of the poor. The importance of the individual was the focus—the ideal that people should follow ethical principles rather than what seemed like illogical and unethical rules. They felt responsibility towards others. Most importantly, they felt it was their responsibility to use poetry to inform and inspire, and of course, to change society. When we talk about Romantic poetry, we often think of William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821).

Victorian poetry is easy to define: it refers to poetry written during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Victorian poetry was similar in many ways to that of the Romantics. However, Victorian poetry often takes on science as a theme, especially in relationship to religion. Victorian poets are considered more humorous than the Romantics; the Victorian era held a lot of "whimsy and nonsense," (Tim Morris, 2001).

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Charles Dickens (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) was an English writer and social critic. He wrote some of the world's best-known fictional characters. He is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. The poem below was originally written for his novel *The Pickwick Papers*.

The Ivy Green

Charles Dickens [1837]

Oh, a dainty plant is the Ivy green,
That creepeth o'er ruins old!
Of right choice food are his meals, I ween*,
In his cell so lone and cold.
The wall must be crumbled, the stone decayed,
To pleasure his dainty whim:
And the mouldering dust that years have made
Is a merry meal for him.
Creeping where no life is seen,
A rare old plant is the Ivy green.

Fast he stealeth on, though he wears no wings,
And a staunch old heart has he.
How closely he twineth, how tight he clings,
To his friend the huge Oak Tree!
And slily he traileth along the ground,
And his leaves he gently waves,
As he joyously hugs and crawleth round
The rich mould of dead men's graves.
Creeping where grim death has been,
A rare old plant is the Ivy green.

Whole ages have fled and their works decayed,
And nations have scattered been;
But the stout old Ivy shall never fade,
From its hale and hearty green.
The brave old plant, in its lonely days,
Shall fatten upon the past:
For the stateliest building man can raise,
Is the Ivy's food at last.
Creeping on, where time has been,
A rare old plant is the Ivy green.

**ween: think, suppose*

* * *

Christina Rossetti (5 December 1830 – 29 December 1894) was an English poet who wrote a variety of romantic, devotional, and children's poems. She is famous for writing *Goblin Market* and "Remember." She also wrote the words of the Christmas carol "In the Bleak Midwinter".

The Skylark

Christina Georgina Rossetti [1872]

The earth was green, the sky was blue:
I saw and heard one sunny morn,
A skylark hang between the two,
A singing speck above the corn;

A stage below, in gay accord,
White butterflies danced on the wing,
And still the singing skylark soared,
And silent sank and soared to sing.

The cornfield stretched a tender green
To right and left beside my walks;
I knew he had a nest unseen
Somewhere among the million stalks:

And as I paused to hear his song,
While swift the sunny moments slid,
Perhaps his mate sat listening long,
And listened longer than I did.

* * *

George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (22 January 1788 – 19 April 1824), commonly known simply as Lord Byron, was an English poet, peer, politician, and a leading figure in the Romantic movement. Among his best-known works are the long narrative poems, “Don Juan” and “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,” and the short lyric poem below, "She Walks in Beauty.”

She Walks in Beauty

George Gordon Byron [1814]

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o’er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Percy Bysshe Shelley (4 August 1792 – 8 July 1822) was a major English Romantic poet, regarded as among the best lyric poets in the English language. He was certainly one of the most influential. Shelley was a key member of a close circle of visionary poets and writers that included Lord Byron and his own second wife, Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

Ozymandias

Percy Bysshe Shelley [1818]

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

* * *

William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was a major English Romantic poet who, along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798.

I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud (Daffodils)

William Wordsworth [1804-7]

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

* * *

William Blake (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. He was an important figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age.

A Poison Tree

William Blake [1794]

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.